



The Nelson A. Rockefeller Center
at Dartmouth College

*The Center for Public Policy
and the Social Sciences*

The Class of 1964 **Policy Research Shop**

EXPANDING UNIVERSAL SCHOOL MEALS FOR THE FUTURE OF VERMONT CHILDREN

PRESENTED TO THE VERMONT HOUSE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION

Rep. Peter Conlon, Chair

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This report was written by undergraduate students at Dartmouth College under the direction of professors in the Rockefeller Center. Policy Research Shop (PRS) students produce non-partisan policy analyses and present their findings in a non-advocacy manner. The PRS is fully endowed by the Dartmouth Class of 1964 through a class gift in celebration of its 50th Anniversary given to the Center. This endowment ensures that the Policy Research Shop will continue to produce high-quality, non-partisan policy research for policymakers in New Hampshire and Vermont.





Background

- Federally-funded Universal School Meals (USMs) during COVID-19 pandemic
- Academic, nutritional, social benefits observed
- Vermont extended for 2022-23 school year for \$29 million
- Recent federal updates
 - Medicaid Direct Certification
 - USDA to lower CEP threshold



Problem Statement

Universal School Meals provide many benefits. However, this comes at a cost.

What is the cost of USMs and how would it change?

How can we minimize this cost?

Are the benefits of USMs unique to the universal model?



Methodology

- Comparative case studies: Nevada, Maine, and Vermont
 - Certification process
 - Maximizing federal funds
- Focus groups: Vermont middle schools
 - Stigma
- Cost analysis
 - 2022-23 Year
 - 2024-25 Year
 - Long-term trends



Case Study: Maine

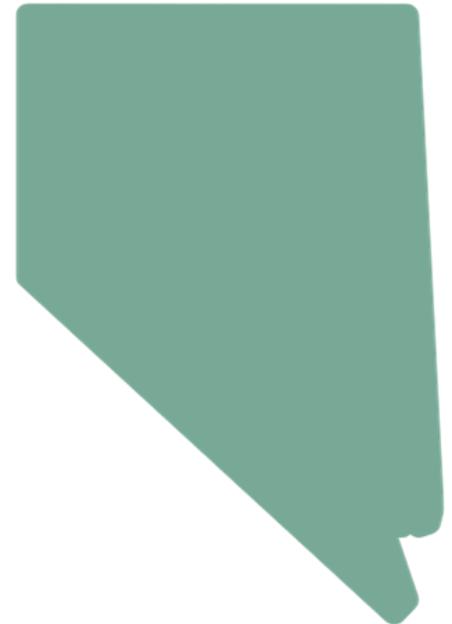
- Interviews
 - State Nutritional Director
 - Full Plates Full Potential
- Findings
 - Online application unsuccessful
 - Decrease in meal applicants
 - USMs encourage CEP & Provision II participation





Case Study: Nevada

- Interview
 - State Nutrition Supervisor
- Findings
 - USMs improved financial standing of school districts
 - Direct certification requires consistent coordination
 - Communication challenges





Case Study: Vermont

- Interviews
 - State Nutritional Director
 - Hunger Free Vermont
- Findings
 - VT bill ensures fund maximization
 - Minimal decline in applications
 - Medicaid Direct Certification
 - USMs maximize federal funds





Focus Groups

	Middle School A	Middle School B	Middle School C
Identified Student Percentage (ISP)	Over 40 percent	30 - 40 percent	Below 20 percent
Region in Vermont	Southern	Northern	Western



Focus Group Findings

- Decreased stigma
 - Reduced separation of students based on meal status
- Increased meal participation
 - Decreased food insecurity and hunger
- Benefits regardless of ISP
 - Impact in wealthiest school





Cost Analysis

Basic model provided by JFO:

*Cost per meal * School enrollment * Paid student percentage
* Participation rate = Daily cost*

- Updated participation rate data & federal reimbursements
- Paid student percentage incorporates 1.6 CEP multiplier
- 2024-25 estimate accounts for Medicaid Direct Certification, lowered CEP threshold



Cost Estimates

	Fall 2022 Participation Rates (39/61%)	Average Participation Rate (60/75%)
2022-23 School Year	\$25 million	\$33 million
2024-25 School Year	\$22 million	\$30 million



Long-Term Trends Affecting Cost

- Participation rates would likely increase over time
- Federal policies are subject to change
- Demographics are changing in the state of Vermont



Conclusion

What is the cost of USMs and how would it change?

\$25 million; likely to remain stable in future years

How can we minimize this cost?

Federal rule changes; insight from other states

Are the benefits of USMs unique to the universal model?

Yes, regarding stigma and increased meal participation